

Afghanistan Meets the *Amazon*: Reading *The Kite Runner* in America

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THE EFFUSIVE CUSTOMER REVIEWS OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE Runner* posted on *Amazon* often register surprise: many Americans were initially reluctant to read what they perceived to be “foreign” fiction.¹ Their short-lived resistance and their subsequent enthusiasm raise an important question. What does this novel, largely about Afghanistan, offer American readers? Why did so many not merely purchase the book but skip work, ignore children, and delay sleep to finish it, and why did they then proceed to recommend it to everyone they knew, making *The Kite Runner* a massive best seller without the help of any large-scale promotional mechanisms?²

One *Amazon* customer explains the book's appeal thus:

It is foreign in language at times, in metaphor some of the time, and in detail of situation almost all the time. But at its core it is more deeply human than any book I've read this year. Loss, grief, betrayal, honor, guilt, self-contempt, love, redemption—these cross nationalities and ethnicities and if anyone doubted that I challenge them to hold those same doubts after reading this novel. Hosseini has fashioned his characters and situations into sharp drillpoints that bore inside the reader and leave him/her gasping in pain and pleasure. (B. Capossere)

As an invitation to read *The Kite Runner*, the reviewer promises a sadomasochistic experience. Though slightly more graphic than the average, this review is an exemplary measure of the visceral, intimate, sometimes painful relations between book and reader that *The Kite Runner* apparently enables and consumers apparently seek.³ This essay examines Hosseini's novel and the hundreds of responses to it on *Amazon*—a remarkable source of information about contemporary readers, which has thus far received scant scholarly attention—to produce a better understanding of the desires, values,

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and expectations that shape the reception of “foreign” fiction among Americans. Paradoxically, the book’s perceived transcendence, its ability to cross the borders between nationalities and ethnicities, seems to depend for American readers on its palpable evocation of its unfamiliar setting. Moreover, by depicting a country central to the United States’ war on terrorism, which has been so divisive internationally and domestically, *The Kite Runner* seems only to activate the desire to overcome or elude partisan, ethnic, religious, and national divisions—a desire, it turns out, capable of allying, unpredictably, with a diversity of antagonistic political orientations.

Written in English and designed for an American audience, *The Kite Runner* tells the story of Amir, the narrator, who lives with his wealthy father in Kabul. As Pashtuns, the dominant ethnicity in Afghanistan, they have two servants, Ali and Hassan, who are Hazaras, members of an underprivileged minority ethnicity. Although Amir and Hassan are close friends, Amir fails to defend Hassan from being raped by neighborhood bullies in a racist attack. Amir’s guilt, in conjunction with his resentment toward Hassan for winning the affection of Amir’s distant father, leads Amir to frame Hassan for a petty crime, causing the two servants to depart from the household. Following this, the Soviets invade, Amir and his father immigrate to the United States, Amir marries another Afghan immigrant, his father dies of cancer, and eventually Amir is summoned back to Afghanistan by an old family friend, where he discovers that Hassan is his half-brother. But Hassan has been shot by the Taliban, leaving behind an orphan boy named Sohrab. Amir rescues this boy from Assef, the sadistic pedophile who had raped Hassan and who is now a Taliban official. In the process, Amir seeks to atone for his betrayal of Hassan.

Through its evocation of everyday life in Afghanistan and its frequent use of Farsi vocabulary, *The Kite Runner* foregrounds its

foreignness. According to David Damrosch, Lawrence Venuti, and Pascale Cassanova, works that originate in or depict cultures foreign to their readerships inevitably negotiate two antithetical hazards. One is that readers will exoticize the text, reducing the complexity of the foreign culture to a symbol of tantalizing inscrutability.⁴ The converse danger is that readers will domesticate the text, reading it narcissistically to discover attitudes and values that resemble their own. As an alternative to these two approaches, Damrosch recommends a mode of reading that accommodates both the sense of familiarity and the sense of foreignness that such texts inspire:

The issue is to stay alive to the works’ real difference from us without trapping them within their original context or subordinating them entirely to our own immediate moment and needs. An emphasis on universality can be a powerful aid in protecting the work from either of these extremes, so long as this universality isn’t created by a process of stripping away much of what is really distinctive about the work. (135)

Damrosch’s advice is aimed primarily at scholars and students confronting world literature in an academic context. His commitment to establishing the professional rigor of cross-cultural interpretation, best encapsulated by his remark that “the specter of amateurism haunts comparative literature today” (284), betrays a lack of confidence in the ability of nonacademic audiences to interpret literary representations of foreignness. But, as the *Amazon* reviews demonstrate, the flexible, self-aware responsiveness to the intersections and incompatibilities between the reader’s culture and the represented foreign culture that Damrosch prescribes to professors and students also characterizes the complex cultural work performed, in a somewhat different register, by *The Kite Runner* and by many of its readers in settings outside the university. The reviews frequently suggest dialectical modes

of identification that simultaneously foreground and disavow the alterity of the characters and their culture—and it is the crucial interplay between these seemingly contradictory responses that I aim to examine.⁵

The Kite Runner's resonance in the United States is obviously inseparable from Afghanistan's role in the war on terrorism. In the latter half of this essay, I consider the multiple relations between the American reception of *The Kite Runner* and attitudes toward Islam and the United States military presence in the Middle East and central Asia. Overall, the book has encouraged increased tolerance and sympathy for Muslims.⁶ At the same time, certain sections of the text, most notably depictions of the Taliban, lend tacit support for a neoconservative vision of the United States' interventionist prerogatives. But a majority of reviews disregard *The Kite Runner*'s political valences altogether, and in fact several praise it for eschewing any strong political position.⁷ Frequently such comments suggest, if not a rejection of the United States' war on terrorism, then a utopian yearning for an alternative, nonpolitical solution to current international conflicts—one predicated on humanistic, affective connections of compassion and identification.

Universal Appeal

Judging by the approximately one thousand reviews of *The Kite Runner* submitted between 4 June 2003 and 1 January 2006, *Amazon* customers, many of whom belong to book clubs, are motivated to read and write online reviews not only by a desire to share recommendations with like-minded readers but also by an urge to participate in a public forum dedicated to debating the question of what constitutes good literature.⁸ A major topic among reviewers is whether *The Kite Runner*'s subject matter, Afghanistan, is responsible for the novel's success. Notwithstanding their initial resistance to the foreign setting, many appreciate Hos-

seini's novel for offering a digestible history of Afghanistan from the 1970s to 2001 and for describing some of the country's cultural, social, and religious practices.⁹ Other readers, however, assert that the book is popular only because it portrays a country that is, or was briefly, front-page news.¹⁰ Eager to forestall these criticisms, reviewers repeatedly maintain that *The Kite Runner* is about not just Afghanistan but also universal human themes, such as guilt, friendship, fatherhood, and forgiveness, and is therefore a classic.¹¹

The attention of recent academic scholarship to the cultural and ideological specificity of literary works has challenged the conception of great literature as a repository of universal truths. But, rather than treat the attribution of universality as inherently, indeed *universally*, wrongheaded, it is important to understand these attributions as responsive to a particular set of political circumstances. The category of the universal, as Damrosch notes, has served many different purposes throughout history (135–39). In claiming that *The Kite Runner* treats themes that underscore our shared humanity, readers are often resisting the onslaught of exoticizing, disparaging conceptions of the Islamic world famously lamented by Edward Said and all the more pervasive now.¹² Nonetheless, some of these reviews betray undercurrents of ambivalence. According to one, "[Hosseini] says, in effect, here is a story about people in my land of origin. Yes, they are people of Afghanistan, but they are simply people, too, who are much like us" (Bruce Stern). Although insistent on the characters' humanity, the reviewer asserts a tension between the category "people of Afghanistan" and the category "simply people" as if Afghans' humanity were guaranteed as a precultural status but also jeopardized by their nationality. At the same time, he demonstrates his sincere effort to transcend cultural divisions by actively identifying with Hosseini, *voicing* Hosseini's perspective in the first person, declaring that Afghanistan

is “my land of origin.” A sentence later, however, he quickly, if inconspicuously, repositions himself, identifying with the privileged “us”—that is, American readers—who may be willing to grant personhood to Afghans, but only insofar as they resemble Americans.

The reviewer oscillates dramatically between several positions in a brief set of remarks because he is enacting a dialogue with certain dehumanizing assumptions about the Islamic world. Another reader remarks, “We ‘European Americans’ have so little knowledge of that part of the world (we seem to only want to destroy it) that this picture of pre Soviet Afghanistan is a must read for those in the US that think that anyone from South Asia or the Middle East are a bunch of nuts and terrorists” (Megan Brizzolara). Though potentially problematic, assertions of a shared humanity represent what might be called “strategic universalism”—in response to an approach that constitutes ethnic stereotypes as exhaustively definitive and invidiously divides the West and Islam into polarized categories.¹³ Thus, one reviewer writes, “A moving coming of age tale that brings us face to face with the reality and beauty of not only the Muslim world but the universality of our common humanity, passions and frailties. Not for the ideologically blinded” (George R. Odell). The rhetoric of universality here reads as a contingently necessary rejoinder to a divisive ideology.

Moreover, as other reviews demonstrate, claims about *The Kite Runner*’s universality need not entail a complete negation of cultural difference:

From the bigger-than-life father to whom sin at its root is lies, to the son’s guilt based on cowardice, to the servants’ quiet display of self-confident, natural morality/dignity this novel shows the sin-guilt-belief problem to be universal. In this novel it is played out in an Islamic/Afghani/American stage—the uncommon Afghani backdrop while particularizing the specifics of the story, only adds to the recognition that the problem is universal. (M. J. Smith)

Though privileging the American context as normal in opposition to the “uncommon Afghani backdrop,” the reviewer’s comment insists on a complex understanding of universality. A particular problem is universal only if it emerges in a heterogeneous array of contexts; perceptions of universality, then, require a sensitivity toward difference. To be more than simply the apprehension of an abstraction, the recognition of universality requires “specifics.” These unfamiliar particulars about Afghanistan add something to this recognition that the reviewer does not name; they lend it concrete substance so that the perception of universality in this articulation can be practically identified with the close apprehension of locally embedded details. In contradistinction to the straw-man conception of universality as a product of insufficiently contextualized interpretive approaches, readers’ assertions of universality often seem to be the product of empathy energized dialectically by the tensions and contradictions that the readers are required to negotiate in their efforts to identify with characters who inhabit a culture that they find radically different from their own.

Identification is frequently responsible for the interpretation of *The Kite Runner* as a universal narrative. One reviewer remarks:

The author’s use of description put me along side him in the pages—I could almost taste the pomegranate, smell the kabobs cooking, hear the jagged noise of the bazzars, inhale the smoke and dust and ashes. But most importantly, I learned something. Or at least revisited something I’ve already learned. For me, this is the mark of a great book—that I am removed from my own little patch of universe and submerged in another world altogether and, for all its strangeness, its unfamiliarity, I recognize myself, my humanity, in its story. (J. Olcott)

It is easy to see why the reviewer finds *The Kite Runner* so satisfying. Her experience enables a

sense of her own subjectivity as globally mobile or infinitely capacious, and thus, despite the text's "strangeness" and "unfamiliarity," she identifies with the story, feeling as if she embodies humanity in all its heterogeneous manifestations. While scholars such as Elizabeth Barnes argue that sympathy as a basis for politics tends to be either too provincial or too homogenizing, the sympathy articulated by reviewers of *The Kite Runner* often synthesizes a sense of sameness and a sense of otherness, exemplifying a fertile tension, which mediates both their perceptions of the represented foreign characters and, at least in the moment of reading, their perceptions of themselves.

Although readers' imaginative efforts are in part responsible for this defamiliarizing experience of identification, it is an effect that Hosseini clearly aims to produce. Amir describes a typical scene from his childhood as follows:

We chased the *Kochi*, the nomads who passed through Kabul on their way to the mountains of the north. We would hear their caravans approaching our neighborhood, the mewling of their sheep, the *baaing* of their goats, the jingle of bells around their camels' necks. We'd run outside to watch the caravan plod through our street, men with dusty, weather-beaten faces and women dressed in long, colorful shawls, beads, and silver bracelets around their wrists and ankles. We hurled pebbles at their goats. We squirted water on their mules. (26)

Through its glaringly orientalist imagery, the passage allows American readers to enjoy Afghanistan from a comfortable distance, as tourists, but by placing them in an outsider's position it facilitates their identification with Amir, who occupies a similar position in relation to the nomads. Even as it appears to traffic in stereotypes, with its caravans, its camels, and its colorful shawls, the passage reveals some of Afghanistan's complexity, underlining distinctions between the nomads, who have preserved their indigenous culture, and

Amir, who watches them with hostile curiosity and spends his afternoons viewing American westerns and drinking Coca-Cola. But if Amir is more Americanized than other segments of Afghan society, he also expresses a profound affection for Kabul's local culture—its bazaars, its cuisine, its language—and as an adult he becomes a practicing Muslim. Indeed, his act of bowing to Mecca and uttering a desperate, half-remembered prayer while doctors struggle to revive his nephew, Sohrab, after a suicide attempt is one of the most emotionally potent moments in the text. In that scene, Amir's hesitant approach to his inherited religion stands in marked, perhaps deliberate, contrast to the stereotypical image of the fanatical Muslim. With his divided attachments and his hybrid identity, Amir offers a portrayal of Afghanistan that preserves the well-nigh kitschy allure of its perceived foreignness but simultaneously renders its specific cultural practices emotionally resonant for American readers. Moreover, his narrative of sin and redemption conforms to both Christian and Muslim concepts of salvation, and it is thus well designed to inspire the kinds of identification, capable of accommodating difference, that its readers consistently describe.

Generally speaking, reviewers characterize the experience of identification as an intensely emotional one; they feel what they believe the characters are feeling: "We feel (and feel for) Amir's hunger for a cold father's love, Hassan's pure and deadly devotion" (Dolly A. Berthelot). Although some readers identify shared values, principles, or concepts, many emphasize emotion as that which transcends socially constituted boundaries: The book "proves that human emotions such as love, loss, betrayal, and hope are timeless and can be found anywhere, regardless of class or culture" (Stephanie Henry). Another reviewer breathlessly reports:

Not knowing anything much about Afghanistan I simply wasn't interested and was afraid

it would be about people I could not in any way relate to. How wrong and stupid I was! Oh my. Not only am I now fascinated by Afghanistan and want to learn as much as possible about the country and peoples but if you are a human with a beating heart you will find the themes in this book are universal: love, betrayal, redemption. (Elspeth)

Affect, it would seem, wields an almost unquestionable authority. The very faculty for apprehending the universality of certain themes is, according to this reader, the “beating heart.” Hence, emotion serves as an instance of cross-cultural continuity and as the means of apprehending and assessing its own unifying character. For many readers, the universal appears to be nothing other than the name for this overwhelming feeling of empathy. And to deny the validity of such feelings or the broad conclusions they support is to raise suspicions about one’s humanity. Thus, articulations of affective humanism instantiate a mildly coercive rhetorical power, but in acknowledging this power, I do not mean to dismiss either their validity or the global mimetic purchase of the emotions they invoke. While such contentions mobilize styles of judgment alien to academic modes of inquiry, they merit consideration by all kinds of readers, especially given their obvious, if underexamined, persuasive potency. The challenge for professors who introduce *The Kite Runner* to their students, in my view, is to bring these affective negotiations with cultural difference into a critical, mutually invigorating dialogue with more dispassionate and scholarly strategies, such as the kind that Damrosch demonstrates, without automatically privileging one approach over the other.

Masochism

Given the many harrowing incidents in the novel, identification with its characters can be rather upsetting, even unpleasant. What, then, is the appeal of an empathetic experi-

ence so powerful that it becomes painful?¹⁴ *Amazon* reviewers proudly announce that the book made them cry, made them nauseated, made them lose sleep, made them feel beaten up—all of which suggest an intense bodily form of identification with Amir.¹⁵ “There were times I hated reading this book. I went days feeling physically sick from the story” (M. Schijvens). “The emotions are so deep and raw, I can’t really go into it. This book is filled with such unspeakable sadness. Amir’s guilt turned me into an insomniac. . . . I was Amir. I felt all the pain and betrayal. . . . I was Hassan. I was destroyed, elated, torn in two by the powerful emotions in this book” (Lover of books; ellipses in orig.). One reviewer refers to *The Kite Runner* as “pure CPR!” (Book Maven), a comment that treats vicarious suffering as a revitalizing experience for readers who are in some way emotionally deadened and thus dangerously excluded from a full participation in humanity, a normative category clearly predicated on affective capacity.

The Kite Runner depicts a peculiar form of suffering, which defers the catharsis typically provoked by narratives focused on the heroic martyrdom of innocent or helpless victims. That is, it explores the guilt of those who are responsible for or complicit with the victimization of others. As one reviewer puts it:

While reading this book I wished to scream at the characters in the book, wished to tell them that they were making the wrong decision. But then I looked into myself and realized that I would have made the same wrong decision. At that point my hatred was toward myself. This book was moving, so much so that as one of the reviews on the back of the book puts it, it is “excruciating” to read. (Mark L. Harris)

Identifying with a character who falls prey to pettiness, cowardice, and selfishness can be painfully disconcerting. Having watched Hassan get raped without intervening and having then banished his best friend from his home—an act he thinks is indirectly respon-

sible for Hassan's death—Amir is desperate for something apparently many readers also crave: forgiveness.

The second half of the novel depicts Amir's agonizing effort to atone for his crimes, including a near-fatal confrontation with Assef. And Hosseini does his best, through an array of tactics, which a few skeptics on *Amazon* deem "manipulative," to allow readers to vicariously experience Amir's suffering.¹⁶ An urge to inflict emotional pain on the reader motivates some of the more devastating moments in the text, including Hassan's rape, his execution by Taliban soldiers, and Sohrab's attempted suicide. But apparently the pain of the reading experience allows people to appropriate a measure of atonement for themselves, in relation to their own sense of guilt. One reviewer dramatically observes, "Passages from this book will burn themselves into your heart, breaking it and then putting it back together piece by piece" (K. Kuehl), asserting that *The Kite Runner* wounds readers in order to heal them. Another describes the peace we feel in "releasing our hidden demons" and hopes that, in reading *The Kite Runner*, "you will find inner peace within its pages" (Iles Fan). A third describes the book as initiating a therapeutic process: "The author brilliantly lets us feel the paralysis of fear, then the paralysis of guilt and then finally embark on the road to recovery of both relationship with others and acceptance of ourselves" (Kent Holland).

Identification with Amir, then, performs a complex psychological function. Readers empathize with his suffering and reinforce their belief in their own humanity through an amplification of their emotional economy and a renewed perception of their capacity for compassion. But readers also identify with Amir's status as victimizer, and they are thus reminded of their own mistakes and transgressions. The pain of the reading experience—a mix of guilt-saturated discomfort, embarrassed self-recognition, and visceral

compassion—enables them to imagine themselves partaking in Amir's difficult process of atonement. Even many of those reviewers who do not claim that they directly feel Amir's pain take from the book a reactivated belief that their own flaws and weaknesses are defining features of their humanity and thus deserving of forgiveness.¹⁷

If Amir embodies universal humanity, his crime and its consequences are completely bound up with the particulars of Afghanistan's turbulent history. Partially responsible for Amir's actions toward Hassan are the ethnically determined social roles they have been assigned—roles that, in a sense, *require* Hassan to suffer stoically for Amir. Though disturbing, their master-servant dynamic is not something that Amir can be expected as a boy to understand fully or overcome. At the same time, his choices' devastating repercussions, in part the product of global-historical developments, including the Soviet invasion, the civil war, and the Taliban's seizure of power, magnify the meaning of his crime, rendering it at once painfully irrevocable and yet brilliantly legible in its demands for some act of penitence.¹⁸ This, then, is an ideal crime to elicit identification: it is deeply awful, but deeply forgivable, and thus perfectly structured to produce a simulation of valorizing atonement for those whose shortcomings, mistakes, and breaches of ethics fail to acquire such dramatic proportions.¹⁹

It is important to note that readers do not just imaginatively inhabit Amir's experiences in escapist fashion; they use the novel to recast and disambiguate their own experiences. "I think everyone will see a little bit of themselves or people they know in this remarkable story" (Teacher). "For any child that has treated a friend spitefully, that has acted cowardly, that yearns for the approval of an indifferent parent, that has a sin to expiate, it carries a simple emotional truth" (A New York Reader). The act of identifying with Amir enables readers to appropriate the historically and culturally

bound energies attached to Amir's actions and thereby view their own failings as commensurately consequential, clear, and tragic—as both larger in significance and more deserving of forgiveness than these readers may have previously conceived. Afghanistan's sublimely ruinous history has everything to do with this dramatizing, clarifying, and purifying effect, and therefore Amir's culturally specific identity is no less important than its dialectical counterpart, the narrative's perceived transcendence, in eliciting a therapeutic process of identification from readers. Thus, while quick to claim that Amir's story resonates beyond his time and place, reviewers also frequently describe the power Afghanistan, as a setting, exerts over their responses. "I feel like *The Kite Runner* opened my mind, and desposited me directly into Afganistan" (Tim A.). "I could smell the lamb kabob, and feel the essence of a society so different than our own" (beachlvr). Imaginatively inhabiting a foreign country, readers can recognize themselves in an exotically tinged image of suffering humanity that entails the possibility of meaningful atonement—a psychological effect that may account for readers' eagerness to treat the book as universal.

A common observation is that *The Kite Runner* offers a revealing look at a completely unfamiliar culture and that it nevertheless tells an essentially human story, to which any reader can relate.²⁰ "In fact the book provides wonderfully vivid descriptions of the locations and cultures of Afghanistan and its people. However, the story here is about the power of friendship and our ability to overcome our weaknesses and prevail over adversity. These themes are universal and will speak to readers of any culture" (Andrew W. Johns). The frequent proximity of these two apparently disparate observations suggests that they are not opposed but instead constitutive of each other and that perhaps the *however* that typically conjoins them ought to be replaced with *therefore*. American readers,

in other words, identify with Amir and conceive of him as a universal figure not only *in spite* but also *because* of the particularizing character of his Afghan identity. Amir enables readers to project themselves, through a combination of narcissism and dislocation, into a foreign identity, facilitating their discovery of familiar values and feelings in what they perceive to be an extremely inhospitable context, as a test case of an idealistic hypothesis about human commonality. Identification with Amir's accessible foreignness thus serves to substantiate an otherwise pallidly theoretical understanding of universality, lending it an immediate, defamiliarizing embodiment, while simultaneously allowing readers to make a personal claim on the pain and tragedy that they associate with Afghanistan for a therapeutic process of self-dramatization and self-forgiveness.

Victims and Monsters

The *Amazon* customer reviews describe a family of affective responses, including sympathy, compassion, empathy, and identification, all of which seem to function as demonstrative proofs of humanity. Interestingly enough, however, the central figure of the reader's identification, Amir, is overwhelmed by anxieties regarding his own humanity. As a young boy, he writes a story about a character whose tears turn into pearls. Greedy for the wealth he can generate, the man eventually murders his wife to make himself cry (30–31). If the reviews of *The Kite Runner* are any indication, tears are a sought-after commodity.²¹ But, as Amir's story suggests, they require victims and thus place us in an uneasy, even guilty, relationship to those suffering subjects who enable us to experience our own humanity. Amir feels intense sympathy for his half-brother Hassan, whose ethnicity makes him a tragic victim in Afghan society. To sympathize with a victim and not be one, however, a person must occupy a position of privilege and superiority

vis-à-vis the victim, as Lauren Berlant has observed (“Compassion” and “Poor Eliza”). Hassan, whose innocent, bewildered face Amir compares to that of a sacrificial lamb, suffers dehumanization so that Amir can be human, and the compassion Amir feels for Hassan is accompanied by the anxiety that he himself may be Hassan’s victimizer—a status that would paradoxically endanger his own claim to humanity. Remembering a dream Hassan once described about a monster lurking at the bottom of a lake, Amir responds, “I wanted to tell them all that *I* was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake” (105). What ultimately saves Amir from the status of monster and preserves his humanity is his unrelenting sense of guilt. Throughout his life, Amir is tormented, indeed victimized, by the sense that he is a victimizer. And in fact it is his guilt that renders him, for many *Amazon* reviewers, such a sympathetic, human figure.²² The readiness to identify with his dilemma betrays something about the guilty conscience of American readers and their need for vicarious experiences that reaffirm their humanity, a status that exists in a complex relation of emotionally fraught mutual dependence with that very sense of guilt.

The truly inhuman character, the monster, is the one who claims to suffer no guilt for his crimes: Assef, the outlandishly evil neighborhood bully and Taliban official. Characterizing his involvement in the ethnic cleansing of Hazaras, Assef declares, “You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘liberating’ until you’ve done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent” (277). Although at one point Amir dreams that Assef tells him, “We’re the same, you and I” (307), one of Assef’s primary functions in the text is to embody a form of monstrosity against which Amir’s guilt-ridden humanity can be defined. Amir sympathizes with Hassan, and in moments he equates himself with Assef, but his status as human depends on his un-

comfortable position somewhere in between the roles of victimizer and victim, capable of identifying with both but never truly being either. One reviewer observes, “The main problem in my mind is that there is little character development at all except for the narrator Amir. The good are only good, while the evil are only evil. The good is likened to the lamb about to be sacrificed, while the evil thinks Hitler is a good guy” (kattepus).

Significantly, Amir is also the voice and embodiment of Afghanistan for American readers, and his role is to humanize a country that has been viewed reductively in the American media at times as a vicious monster and at times as a sacrificial lamb. In particular, Hosseini is intent on defining not only Amir but also his country against the monstrosity that Assef instantiates as the book’s primary representative of the Taliban. Many customers, who otherwise loved *The Kite Runner*, express puzzlement or irritation with Assef’s one-dimensional characterization and with his implausible reappearance as a Taliban official.²³ Assef’s excessively evil, entirely unbelievable character seems to inhabit a literary genre separate from that of the rest of the book or an ontological order separate from that of the daily life of Afghanistan, which Hosseini tries to portray in all its complexity—but this aesthetic inconsistency may be the point. Assef functions as a contrived vehicle designed to characterize the Taliban as an instance of ahistorical evil with no real connection with the rest of Afghanistan. Significantly, Assef is half-German, and from a young age he professes an admiration for Hitler; Assef’s brutality and by extension the Taliban’s, Hosseini suggests, do not originate in anything indigenous or unique to Afghan culture or, for that matter, to Islam.

It is perfectly understandable that Hosseini would want to sever his readers’ perceptions of Afghanistan from their views of the Taliban, whose radical ideology does not reflect the beliefs or cultural traditions of a

majority of Afghans, but his rhetoric seems in moments to simplify and elide the historical complexity of his country.²⁴ One reviewer complains, “Hosseini has the skills but not the courage nor the empathy/sympathy to portray the Taliban as historical, sociological, economic, modern creations. Discounting his own skills, he characterizes the Taliban in the easiest way—as simple, cartoonish, evil. He thereby does nothing to enlighten us” (Chai Trek). Of course, one could argue that this customer has approached the novel with misplaced expectations; capturing the Taliban’s “historical, sociological, and economic” dimensions may be beyond the purview of a work of fiction. The reason that his or her concerns are worth entertaining, however, is that many readers seem to approach *The Kite Runner* either as an accurate record of Afghanistan’s recent history or as a preferable substitute for such a record—more valuable than nonfiction precisely for its humanizing function. But Hosseini’s text performs this function by means of some dangerous misrepresentations—most notably, an unrealistic, demonizing portrait of the Taliban, which, at least in certain moments, de-emphasizes the historical conditions that help to account for their emergence.²⁵ It is extremely unlikely, for instance, that Assef, the son of upper-middle-class parents living in Kabul, would have joined the Taliban—given that they won their recruits during the 1990s primarily from the rural impoverished refugees dependent on the charity of the madrasas in Peshawar and that they generally installed their own members when occupying a city (Rashid). Although, in other moments in the text, Hosseini describes the brutal Soviet invasion, the civil war between rival mujahedin, and the unbearable poverty that led people to welcome the Taliban for their ability to restore order to the country, his treatment of Assef seems to downplay the multiple conditions responsible for the Taliban’s appeal, instead positing a monstrous appetite for violence as the pri-

mary motive for supporting or participating in the group’s activities.

The Kite Runner’s depiction of the Taliban appears to lend support for the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan. And yet, while some readers have drawn this conclusion, others have interpreted the novel as fundamentally at odds with Bush’s war on terrorism. It is possible, of course, to conclude that *The Kite Runner* provides evidence in favor of the decision to invade Afghanistan but does not endorse the Bush administration’s overall approach to foreign policy or the war in Iraq. What is remarkable about Hosseini’s novel, however, is its capacity to appeal to readers who understand it as categorically supporting a neoconservative interventionist philosophy and to those who understand it as categorically opposing this position, while also earning praise among many for apparently avoiding a determinate political stance altogether. How do the novel’s rhetorical postures structure and delimit its interpretations so as to give the heterogeneous range of responses their particular shape? *The Kite Runner*’s popularity can be understood as a product of its responsiveness to geo-therapeutic needs shared by readers on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Encouraging Americans’ belief that they are human—that is, imperfect but nonetheless compassionate and benign—is evidently a function with widespread appeal. But Hosseini’s concept of the human is malleable enough to serve competing political agendas, each of which accents this concept in its own characteristic way.

Bolstered by an abundance of textual evidence, those on *Amazon* who interpret the book as supporting Bush’s overall foreign policy outnumber those who read it as rejecting his policy by approximately two to one. The Afghanistan Amir remembers inhabiting as a child, an idealized product of his nostalgia, is fairly permissive and thus ostensibly ripe for American-style democracy. One reader, equating Afghanistan in the 1970s with the

United States now, remarks, “Being the wife of a career soldier who has spent time in the Middle East, I have to say that this book really made me realize what we are fighting for . . . the life that these people used to have, the life that we Americans take for granted everyday” (B. Udy; ellipsis in orig.). Although the Bush administration’s war on terrorism has produced largely negative perceptions of Islam,²⁶ its interventionist approach, as this review points out, depends in its most idealistic articulations on the assertion of common human urges—most notably, a desire for freedom—that ought, in its view, to render the people of Islamic nations amenable to the United States’ democratizing mission. For some readers, then, Hosseini’s effort to underscore commonalities between Afghans and Americans lends support for this mission.²⁷

Bush’s supposedly inclusive conception of humanity, of course, requires the demonization of certain people—alleged terrorists, who define humanity by standing outside its normative limits—a tactic not unlike *The Kite Runner*’s. Commenting on Assef to his nephew, Amir declares, “Your father was a good man. But that’s what I’m trying to tell you, Sohrab jan. That there are bad people in this world, and sometimes bad people stay bad. Sometimes you have to stand up to them” (319). Humanity in *The Kite Runner* acquires a definitive status by opposing itself to monstrosity, but Hosseini equivocates in his efforts to locate monstrosity, in some moments underscoring its tense intimacy with humanity, characterizing it as a potential that exists in everyone, and in other moments exoticizing it, identifying it with unambiguously “bad” people, like Assef and, more generally, the Taliban. For Amir, exorcizing his own inner monstrosity and affirming his humanity consist of confronting and defeating the external monstrosity that he identifies with the radically evil Assef—an imperative resonant with the quasi-messianic zeal of Bush’s neoconservatism. Amir’s primary source of

guilt, after all, is his *failure to intervene*, when Assef, unwittingly training to assume duties as a Taliban official, brutalizes Hassan. Perhaps inspired by the novel’s repudiation of passivity, one customer remarks, “Anyone who doubts the need to stamp out terrorism should read this book” (P. Newton). Another, less patriotic reviewer reaches a similar conclusion about the novel’s politics.

And I thought his handling of September 11 was just irresponsible. He mentions the event itself, but then there’s no mention at all of the fallout in Afghan communities in the US. Nothing about the people hiding in their homes because people who appeared Middle Eastern were harrassed, assaulted, or sometimes killed. No mention of the outrage American Afghans felt at the abrupt change in US policy towards Afghanistan or the subsequent war. Nothing. I have to wonder, cynically, if he purposely left this out because he knew how many of his American audience he would piss off if he appeared “un-American” and I just don’t have much respect for that. (Jennifer M-R)

Whether or not deliberate calculations motivated the omissions detailed by this reviewer, it is undeniable that Amir, who never reports any encounters with racism in his new country of residence, depicts the United States as a remarkably hospitable place for Muslims.

Those who read the book as opposing Bush’s policies are vague but passionate in their justifications.²⁸ One reader, referring to *The Kite Runner* as “afghani reality therapy,” remarks:

The novel contains an eloquent and moving picture of afghanistan before and during the taliban period seen through the eyes of afghanis, some who stayed and some who left. This portrait is so valuable that it should be required reading for those who choose to interfere in afghanistan’s (and iraq’s) affairs. (Fat chance, I’m afraid). (Christopher G. Kenber)

Another, asserting a slightly different stance, declares, “I am horrified & disheartened as

an American that we have not done more for these amazing compassionate, generous people & country” (Rone Prinz). While it is unclear what exactly the reviewer wants the United States to do, he or she opposes the current administration’s actions, describing Afghans as the victims of “this so called ‘war on terrorism.’” Though not in full agreement, both reviewers assume that unsympathetic, dehumanizing attitudes toward Muslims in the Middle East and central Asia, rather than benevolent motives, have underwritten support for Bush’s military incursions, and they believe that Hosseini’s novel may change these attitudes.

While *The Kite Runner* offers few overt challenges to the Bush administration’s neo-conservative philosophy, it nevertheless provides a complex form of emotional comfort to readers who are disturbed by their own country’s actions and thus less inclined to disavow and exoticize the monstrosity that, according to Amir, incessantly threatens humanity. For Americans “horried and disheartened” by the United States’ war on terrorism, Hosseini offers a recuperative narrative that identifies humanity, through Amir, precisely with sin and guilt, thus allowing readers to feel human as a consequence of their struggle to cope with the worry that they, as American citizens, are among the victimizers. At the same time, the novel allows readers to engage in visceral experiences of compassion and sympathy for Hosseini’s Afghan characters, who serve perhaps as symbolic surrogates for all the Muslims that the United States is bombing, detaining, or racially profiling, and thus licenses these readers to distinguish themselves from the status of victimizer, which they may identify with the Bush administration’s prosecution of the war on terrorism. The reading of *The Kite Runner* can be understood, then, as an act of collective atonement for those Americans who are troubled by their country’s treatment of Muslims abroad and at home. This effect may also include, in a slightly different way, read-

ers on the right who understand their painful empathy with the book’s characters not as atonement, but as a vindicating reminder, in the face of criticism, that they are compassionate, good human beings whose politics are fundamentally well intentioned.

For American readers wearied by the regular doses of bad news about the United States’ occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the novel offers a third option: fantasies of escape from political divisions altogether (see n7, above). Several readers express relief that *The Kite Runner* is not overtly political. Perhaps relatedly, many maintain that Assef, owing to his unrealistic characterization, interferes with the book’s otherwise moving narrative. Readers consequently were inclined to focus their attention and their emotional investments elsewhere—away from the ideological function that Assef performs. Their appreciation of the ostensibly nonpolitical aspects of the book suggests an unspoken frustration with, perhaps even repudiation of, the polarizing rhetoric that posits a conflict between Islam and the West and may reflect a desire to transcend ideological and ethnic divisions through an affective experience that underscores our shared, though culturally differentiated, humanity. While it may be impossible to resolve violent international conflicts, it is possible at least to “*feel right*,” as Harriet Beecher Stowe famously advised Americans distraught by slavery. Jane Tompkins maintains that a twentieth-century masculine sensibility would dismiss Stowe’s solution as inadequate or naive (132–33), but present-day readers, both male and female, seem dissatisfied enough with the results of conventional military and political mechanisms to imagine sentiment as a more promising basis for overcoming cultural conflicts.²⁹

One review in particular exemplifies this political exhaustion:

While it’s impossible to completely avoid, I try not to comment too much upon the politi-

cal background and the impact it has on the storyline (which is major one) only because Americans will turn around and say ignorant comments, such as “see, we are helping to save the Afghans, (referencing the recent bombing of Afghanistan)” which is, in my view, incorrect (I’ll spare you the elaboration), and takes away from the true potential of this book (although this view in itself may provide for yet another metaphor; how the Afghans first perceived the Taliban arrival with joy, and the eventual consequences of such events). True redemption can only be found within the soul, and for each person redemption requires a separate definition and asking price. This book carries within it a whirlwind of human emotions, and a universal link to what we are intrinsically—connected. Any thought of separateness is a created within the mind. Amir compartmentalized his connections with Hassan for variety of personal and sociocultural reasons, and as a consequence, he consistently experienced cognitive dissonance. When he was finally able to confront himself with the Truth he realized that there always was a very real connection between himself and Hassan. (Roy Munson)

The reviewer adopts an exasperated, resigned tone in expressing his decision to abstain from initiating a political debate—“I’ll spare you the elaboration”—and then changes focus, to highlight what he sees as the “true potential” of the novel, at which point his terms become quasi-religious and psychological. His review performs an act of self-censorship, as if the intrinsic connectedness that exists between people is capable of becoming manifest only through a deliberate eschewal of politics. At the same time, his combative tone seems oddly to belie his utopian vision of a unified humanity.

Possibly inspiring the reader’s response is a similarly idealistic but equally qualified observation Amir makes about his relationship with Hassan:

Because history isn’t easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun

and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing.

But we were kids who had learned to crawl together, and no history, ethnicity, society, or religion was going to change that either. (25)

Ultimately the claim that he and Hassan are capable of transcending the invidious cultural categories that divide them turns out, as Amir fears, to be a fantasy whose failure is the tragedy of the novel. By the end, Hassan is dead, killed by the Taliban in their campaign of ethnic cleansing, and his son, Sohrab, traumatized and mute after a failed suicide attempt, remains almost entirely unresponsive to Amir’s efforts to help him. The one half-smile that Amir is able to elicit from Sohrab in the novel’s final moment of restrained optimism does not, as Amir observes, “make everything all right” (371). Ironically, however, readers often perceive their intense emotional responses to the novel to be elevating enough to bolster utopian aspirations. “Through this novel, you will perhaps begin to understand what has been done to Afghani people and find compassion in your heart for them. You will also witness the inhumanity and cruelty that life can deliver and the power of love and compassion that always wins in the end” (Michelle E.). If not in the tragic narrative itself, then in their own compassionate reaction to it, many readers find a self-validating basis for hope—one that posits their participation in a purportedly universal and unifying affective response as a nonpolitical solution to the ethnic hierarchies and antagonisms that the novel, in order to elicit this response, presents as painfully intractable.

NOTES

This work was supported by a grant from the CUNY Faculty Fellowship Publications Program. I would like to thank the members of my writing group, Brij Singh, Sarah

Covington, Sarah Chinn, Barbara Montero, Nancy Berke, and Ting Man Tsao, for their incisive feedback. I would also like to thank Tala Dowlatshahi and John Brenkman for their extremely useful criticisms and suggestions.

1. See, e.g., K. Solomon; Olga Comas Bacardi; Lori D Widmer; K. M Sowka; Michael Werner; Logan Creek; SB Reader; Nathan Crabtree; I Luv Books; Annie "bookwishes4"; Lee A. Rubinstein; nodice; Jeff T. Blevins; Shana Punim.

2. For descriptions of these responses to the book, see Patricia Kay; C. Marken; Birgit A. Jensen; Christine K. Sartory; Timothy Kearney; Marsha Marks. *The Kite Runner* made it onto best-seller lists in September 2004. By April 2005 it had gone through seventeen printings, and over 1.4 million copies had been sold. It remains on best-seller lists as of August 2008, and in 2007 DreamWorks released a feature film version of the book. See Wilson; Wyatt.

3. For positive reviews that also describe the reading experience as painful, see Michaela Jones; Beausoir; Julie A. Boyd; Donna K. Jenner; Amira A. Clow; Patrick Carlin; Chloe L. Moushey; Peggy G. Lambdin; 1KAT; doc peterson; M. Schijvens; Gerber Daisy; The Stinker; Lover of books; Justin Snow; M. Colleen Talley; Hector Guerra; C. A. Begum; Yasaman Mostajeran; L. Jean-Louis; K. Kuehl; L.K.B.H.; K. Folmar; Mark L. Harris; S. E. Duke; Rebecca of A Better Cause; NC; enthusiastic reader.

4. Edward Said, of course, was one of the first scholars to explore the dangers of exoticization, in *Orientalism*.

5. The complexities of identification have been well explored by Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long in their work on American middle-class reading cultures. The key works by Radway are *A Feeling for Books* and "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader." Long's important contributions include *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*, *Book Clubs*, and "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action."

6. For especially emphatic testimonies to this effect, see Brian K. Tarumoto; Judith R. Wright; James E. O'Leary; Girl Chronicles; Phoebe Snow; Brace Gfeen; Cassandra L. Warren; Click Chick; L. A. Atkins; D. Smith; "margymc"; S. Masula; Janet M. Cortez.

7. Reviewers who appreciate the absence of a distinct political position include Wave Tossed; William R. Sigelkow; P.E.Lee; Click Chick; Annie "Annie"; Robin Friedman; mdscifi_lover; prcarolyn.

8. Readers who identified themselves as members of book clubs include C. J. Procko; E. Haroldsen; Connie V.; Nancy J. Coughlin; Shelly Belden; C. Davis; M. Nichols; D. Maynard; H. Boehning; Avid Reader; Debbie; Linda; "doves wing"; W. Jamison; Laura K; Gentle Reader; Susan B.; Virginia Nuckols; Nathan Crabtree; sb-lynn; BethDeHart; nekkol; L. Roth; snowblaze; Melissa Niksic; Learning All The Time; Acme Reader; R. Boadway; trish's Dish; A Mom at Home; Douglas M. Dixon; Happy Reader; Eileen Davidoff; Shana Punim.

9. See Jon T; Cheryl Tran; K. Rominger; Sherry Johnson; Judith Anne; C. Kim; Judith R. Wright; Paul

Fellows; B. Vander Eyk; S. Masand; M. D. Copeland; B. Flanagan; LZ-1; Carolyn Rowe Hill; Denise; Jessica K.; Scorpion1664; SB Reader; John K. Addis; Bibliophile; kat-tepus; ThomsEBynum; J. Fiorani; Wendy Somerlot Bittel; Maryam Habib Khan; Michele Cozzens; Jack L. Langdon; Tea Molino; Louise D. Somes; J. M. McCormick; S. Langer; D. Smith; Carol A. Sym; A reader 7/16/04; Daffy Du; Professor Joseph L. McCauley; A reader 12/16/04; "bliss-engine"; M. T. Guzman; M. J. Leonard; Cathy O'Connor; Kim keenan; Ayesha Riaz; Andy P.

10. See Squidhunter; Stacy Eichhorn; Roni; Aaron Black; Gene Koo; applepiebooks; Sabad One; Amer Dahmash.

11. See M. McDonald; mtspace; Roy Munson; Deborah Palladino; Michael A. Lacombe; edith lawrence; Paul Fellows; Josh J. Riley; The Stinker; Vijay B. Kumar; Cindy C.; Josh Daniels; Dr Cathy Goodwin; Jennifer McCormick; Luther; Robin Friedman; Stephanie Henry; J. Olcott; Anne Lebrecht; Linda K. Faigaohall; The Inspired One; C. Leibbrand; Eileen Rieback; debonairbear; A reader 8/20/03; Francis J. Mcinerney.

12. Said comments on this in *Orientalism*, but he focuses more directly on media coverage of the Islamic world in *Covering Islam*.

13. Here I am referring to Paul Gilroy's notion of "strategic universalism," which can be read as a response to Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism." Two influential works of scholarship that reinforce a binaristic understanding of Islam and the West are Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* and Bernard Lewis's *The Crisis of Islam*. See also Said, "Clash."

14. Of course, paradoxically, this pain is also pleasurable; in her work on tragedy, Laura Quinney points to a number of thinkers, including Burke, Hume, Kant, and Deleuze, who have explored this double effect (xv).

15. See, e.g., Hector Guerra; enthusiastic reader; Patrick Carlin; SDSonn.

16. See PW; R. Bakker; sb-lynn; D. C. Smith; Dean Blobaum; applepiebooks.

17. For some reviews that suggest this response, see UNC; Lori D Widmer; Yuni; S. Schultz; George R. Odell; Kent Holland; Cheryl Morris; Josh J. Riley; Shelley C. Raker; Cassandra L. Warren; Luther; Anne Lebrecht; K. L. Cotugno; Jerry Caveglia; laleh hama-dani; Reader "tisha69."

18. For detailed historical accounts of this period, see Anwar; Kakar; Magnus and Naby; Edwards, *Before Taliban*.

19. This desire to validate one's own suffering is especially pronounced, according to Catherine Jurca and Barbara Ehrenreich, among members of the American middle class.

20. For examples of reviews that juxtapose these two characterizations, see Karrah Trainer; M. McDonald; Stephanie L. Warfel; mtspace; A. Rutherford; Yasmin Mansoor; CenK Sumbas; Enchanted-reader; j old school; Yuni; Dolly A. Berthelot; Ashley Blackwell; Kent Hol-

land; Wave Tossed; D. K. Miles; George R. Odell; Cynthia K. Robertson; Michael Werner; Ellen Vandewater; Suzanne Somers; M. J. Smith; Dayle; Frederick A. Babb; ReadBks1182; Susan B.; dougrhon; Timothy Kearney; Sunsara Taylor; Catherine J. Thomson; Patricia Kay; Maclen; Ed Foltz; sb-lynn; Tom Arnold; Mary Reinert; Robin Friedman; J. Olcott; K. Folmar; B. Mellon; nekkol; Missie Dowey; Michael S. Rudman MD; A reader 7/8/04; "themage7"; Mary Whipple; M. L. Nieves; Robbie; William E. Adams; PR Kgregus; C. L. Tobin.

21. See Amira A. Clow; Patrick Carlin; Sonya D. Stutts; E. Alavi; M. Patel; Molly J. Mathias; Mooch; Christine K. Sartory; Justin Snow; Hector Guerra; Yasaman Mostajeran; Cathleen A. Dennison; Richard Nelson; Mary Parker; Tracy Oshima; S. E. Duke; Megan Brizzolara; Anne Fitten Glenn (author); "osudebbie"; Analis M.; kehroll; hi; Traci Watson.

22. See, e.g., Sancho Mahle; Dolly A. Berthelot; Sylvanna M. Vargas; Kent Holland; Chloe L. Moushey; M. J. Smith; Grace; Lover of books; Charlene Sanderson; Tom Arnold; Greg Henderson; L.K.B.H.; Michele Cozzens; J. Olcott; Anne Lebrecht; Grady Harp; C. G. Johnson; Patricia Kramer; L. Poor; A reader 7/8/04; Gul A. Zikria M.D.; "bernardetreves"; B. Capossere; A. Rajamani; trish's Dish; Traci Watson.

23. See, e.g., E. Dillon; C. B. Collins Jr.; A New York Reader; Harold R. Zeckel; anduarto; Steve Koss; kattepus; Jennifer M-R; D. C. Smith; Naz; More Over; Manola Sommerfeld; E. Abrams.

24. For an illuminating exploration of Pashtun culture, see Edwards, *Heroes*.

25. Edwards, in *Before Taliban*; Ahmed Rashid; and Hosseini, in his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Sons*, describe the set of extreme and anomalous conditions that enabled the Taliban to assume power. The Soviet occupation and the ensuing civil war killed 1.5 million Afghans and rendered millions more destitute. The Taliban, comprising refugees educated in ascetic conditions in madrasas on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, had not participated in the ethnic and political feuds that had divided the country after the occupation, and they promised to bring peace and unity to a desperate population that no longer trusted its leaders. Moreover, according to Rashid, the United States may well have provided covert aid to the Taliban in the hopes that the group would produce sufficient stability to enable the production of a natural gas pipeline.

26. In *The Next Attack*, published in 2005, Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon point out that a quarter of Americans have negative stereotypes of Muslims; a quarter believe that Muslims value life less than other people; and more than half believe that it would be justifiable to curb the civil rights of Muslims in the United States in order to defend the country against terrorist attacks.

27. See, e.g., Karisa; A. Krafft; Cassandra L. Warren; LBR; "mom3xover"; Gary Griffiths.

28. See, e.g., Megan Brizzolara; Violet Bandong.

29. According to Lauren Berlant, Americans frequently view sentiment, especially "painful feeling," as a unifying experience, predicated on and, at the same time, capable of overcoming cultural and class differences ("Poor Eliza" 641).

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 Iles Fan "Gary," 4 Sept. 2005
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 Jack L. Langdon, 8 Jan. 2005
 James E. O'Leary, 26 July 2005
 Janet M. Cortez "The Omnivorous Reader," 17 Oct. 2005
 Jeff T. Blevins, 14 Dec. 2005
 Jennifer McCormick, 10 Feb. 2005
 Jennifer M-R, 8 Jan. 2005
 Jerry Caveglia, 20 Sept. 2005
 Jessica K., 26 May 2005
 J. Fiorani, 11 Feb. 2005
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 John K. Addis, 14 Mar. 2005
 J. Olcott "Love2Read," 3 Jan. 2005
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 Jon T, 20 Sept. 2005
 Josh Daniels "jd83," 30 Mar. 2005
 Josh J. Riley, 14 July 2005
 Judith Anne, 8 Sept. 2005
 Judith R. Wright, 8 Aug. 2005
 Julie A. Boyd "book lover," 21 Sept. 2005
 Justin Snow, 2 May 2005
 Karisa, 19 June 2005
 Karrah Trainer, 28 Sept. 2005
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 Kent Holland, 13 Aug. 2005
 K. Folmar "Texas Mom," 30 Dec. 2004
 Kim keenan, 19 Dec. 2005
 K. Kuehl "Phi Beta," 10 Feb. 2005
 K. L. Cotugno, 31 Aug. 2004
 K. M Sowka "William Sowka," 28 July 2005
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 K. Solomon, 26 Sept. 2005
 L. A. Atkins "Lesley," 9 Nov. 2004
 laleh hamadani, 8 Sept. 2003
 Laura K, 30 May 2005
 LBR "Wease," 30 Nov. 2004
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 Lee A. Rubinstein "rubindue," 1 July 2004
 Linda, 19 July 2005
 Linda K. Faigaohall, 31 Dec. 2004
 L. Jean-Louis "justLauren," 2 Mar. 2005
 L.K.B.H. "alfie henry," 17 Jan. 2005
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 Lori D Widmer "Reader," 9 Sept. 2005
 Louise D. Somes "Lucy in Dallas," 21 Nov. 2004
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- M. Colleen Talley "Colleen," 1 May 2005
- M. D. Copeland "avid opinionist," 26 July 2005
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- Megan Brizzolara, 19 Oct. 2004
- Melissa Niksic, 12 Dec. 2005
- Michaela Jones, 28 Sept. 2005
- Michael A. Lacombe, 23 Aug. 2005
- Michael S. Rudman MD, 6 Sept. 2004
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- Michele Cozzens, 12 Jan. 2005
- Michelle E., 5 Sept. 2005
- Missie Dowey, 18 Nov. 2004
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- M. L. Nieves, 22 Dec. 2005
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- M. Nichols, 11 Aug. 2005
- Molly J. Mathias "luv2teach," 13 July 2005
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- M. T. Guzman "squeakychu," 29 Sept. 2003
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- Nancy J. Coughlin "momcat," 17 Sept. 2005
- Nathan Crabtree "singer," 25 Mar. 2005
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- IKAT, 22 June 2005
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- Patrick Carlin, 2 Sept. 2005
- Paul Fellows, 4 Aug. 2005
- Peggy G. Lambdin, 7 July 2005
- P.E.Lee "Lizzard," 25 May 2005
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- P. Newton "AZ Minis," 29 Aug. 2005
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- Richard Nelson, 23 Mar. 2005
- Robbie, 29 Nov. 2005
- Robin Friedman, 5 Jan. 2005
- Rone Prinz "artist/traveler," 27 Oct. 2005
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- Shana Punim, 8 Oct. 2005
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- Shelly Belden, 25 Aug. 2005
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- Stephanie L. Warfel, 22 Sept. 2005
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- Tea Molino, 20 Dec. 2004
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William E. Adams, 16 Nov. 2005
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